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Chair

Mr. Tom Lukiwski

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● (1525)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): I call the meeting to order, even though it's a couple of minutes before our scheduled start time.

We we do have a number of witnesses with us today, and I appreciate their being here.

Colleagues, just for your edification, this is how I plan to deal with this. We have two panels of four witnesses each. Each of the two panels will have a 10-minute intervention per organization. Then we will go into, hopefully, a full seven-minute round of questions from each of the committee members. That should bring us to approximately 5 p.m., or shortly thereafter, at which time I will suspend and we will go in camera for some committee business.

Without further ado, I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Association of Canadian Financial Officers, we have Mr. Dany Richard and Mr. Nicolas Brunette-D'Souza.

From the Public Service Alliance of Canada, we have Chris Aylward, who we have had at this committee many times before, and Amy Kishek.

I understand that you have determined what the speaking order will be.

My understanding is that, Mr. Aylward, you're going first for 10 minutes, please.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Chris Aylward (National President, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to meet with you today.

Representing over 120,000 federal public service workers, our main focus is on internal staffing processes. In 2003, the Public Service Modernization Act, or PSMA, made changes to the Public Service Employment Act that were supposed to make staffing faster. While there are still complaints that the process is too slow, many of our members are more concerned about how arbitrary the process has become because of the PSMA changes.

Internal staffing processes need to be fair and appear to be fair, need to reflect the objectives of the Employment Equity Act, and need to provide appropriate career transition opportunities for our members. In the 2007 public service employee survey, when public service workers were asked if the selection process was done fairly in their work unit, 26% said no. Those numbers were even higher for equity groups, and as high as 40% for persons with disabilities.

In the staffing and non-partisanship survey report on the results for the federal public service released last week, 32% of the employees who responded said they felt the selection process in their work unit was not done fairly. Thirty-eight per cent did not agree that the staffing actions were carried out in a transparent way. Almost 54% agreed that appointments depended on who you know.

When the PSMA was enacted, the universally recognized concept of relative merit was replaced with a concept that is less fair and more arbitrary. Merit is now defined as someone who meets the essential qualifications of the position and any additional qualifications or needs that might be considered by the organization currently or in the future.

The PSMA gave front-line managers the ability to make appointments, and defined merit based on individual managerial discretion. Managers don't have to hire the most qualified candidate, only the candidate they think is the best. It is now acceptable to consider only one person for appointment. This has created the potential for abuse, and certainly the appearance of abuse, among our members.

Even layoffs are subject to the current concept of merit. This creates the bizarre situation where employees are made to compete for their own jobs. During the downsizing that occurred earlier this decade, the Public Service Commission was forced to quickly write guidelines to govern the process, which became known as SERLO, or the assessment and selection of employees for retention or layoff process.

The act also expressly encourages and facilitates delegation of the deputy head's authority to appoint to the lowest managerial level possible, creating serious accountability issues. Lack of accountability opens the door to arbitrary staffing decisions and, at the very least, the appearance of favouritism. The current new direction in staffing initiative is reinforcing that delegation to the lowest levels.

Another issue is that employees are often unaware of when staffing processes are taking place, in particular in the case of non-advertised and acting processes. The employer doesn't even have to post indeterminate positions. A hiring manager can decide that a particular person is the right fit for the position and therefore meets the definition and requirements of individual merit. This is neither fair nor equitable.

Non-advertised processes are often used when pools have already been created. Pools raise expectations that they will be used. However, it appears that managers have no obligation to use the pools they create. The task force on diversity and inclusion was told that members of equity-seeking groups qualify for positions after overcoming several barriers and then remain in pre-qualified pools at rates not proportionate with their numbers, with no recourse.

The recourse process itself is undermined and diluted by the PSMA. The Public Service Employment Act now encourages departments to create their own internal recourse mechanism, which results in a lack of consistency across the federal public service. The only informal recourse the Act requires is informal discussion. This allows unsuccessful candidates to talk with their manager about why they were not selected for appointment, or were screened out or not considered for appointment. However, informal discussion and mediation often appear to be dismissed by managers as a mere formality, and decisions are seldom reversed.

● (1530)

Beyond this, complaints to the Public Service Labour Relations and Employment Board can only be filed in very limited situations. These include situations where candidates are not appointed as a result of abuses of authority in determining merit, in choosing between an advertised and non-advertised internal appointment process, or in not assessing candidates in their official language of choice. There is very little time in which to launch a complaint, even within these very limited reasons.

The formal complaint process has become increasingly more legalistic, cumbersome and intimidating. Our volunteer activists are often advocating against lawyers in a clear imbalance of power.

While the old system of appeal boards was far from perfect, it did provide for an independent third party to consider the effect of errors, irregularities and omissions in the selection process. It was informal and easily accessible. These characteristics are absent from the current staffing process and remedies are limited as well. For example, employees cannot be put into a position if their complaint is upheld.

It is also important to note that very few complaints dealing with disabilities or lack of accommodation during a staffing process are pursued, yet disability-related discrimination is consistently identified as significant. It often takes a year or more to issue decisions, which discourages employees from filing complaints.

Many managers underscore staffing decisions with information from performance reports where talent is one of the key criteria. Talent is a very subjective concept, and our members believe that the importance placed on it as a staffing criteria is unfair and unaccountable.

As a result of the new direction in staffing, organizations are expected to self-audit staffing processes. Many departments and organizations are still not equipped to do so. Too often, the audit analysis is framed to support existing staffing decisions. If audits were working, members would not be seeing what they view as clear abuses of the non-advertised appointment process.

Self-auditing results should be shared with local, regional and national unions through consultation. Analysis and creation of audit questions should include a union perspective, as well as organizational surveys of candidates, complainants and all staff. This is not occurring at the national level as much as it should. There are also a number of barriers to equity groups in the staffing process. The Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion noted in its final report the lack of confidence in the fairness of the process.

Barriers identified by employees, as reported by the task force, included: pre-qualified hiring pools, as I've already mentioned; right fit assessments, which they assert are being used to disqualify candidates who meet all other requirements; the absence of opportunities to discuss and resolve the difficult issues of bias and discrimination; the fear of reprisal that prevents employees from raising issues of discrimination and harassment; and finally, very limited remedies.

We have some recommendations.

The current law should be changed so that we are able to negotiate staffing. Collective agreement provisions governing staffing would actually increase the speed in which internal staffing processes would work by setting clear parameters and timeframes.

The speed of staffing could be increased if the definition of merit was changed to include years of service factors.

Internal staffing plans must be complemented by career transition training and mentoring plans. To this end, staffing plans must be discussed with the unions at the local UMC level well ahead of staffing processes. Currently, they are not.

The Public Service Commission should have the power to demand that departments have clear and transparent mechanisms for working with unions and members on staffing issues.

Centralized staffing oversight by the commission should be increased, so that more audits and studies can be done about the real causes of staffing discontent and slow processes. We also support the recommendations on staffing in the report of the Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion.

Finally, regarding complaints about slowness of external staffing, it is important to hire people who can provide the very best services possible, and this principle needs to be balanced against the time it takes to hire them. Staffing may take too long because of human resources capacity in departments. Despite all of the problems with the Phoenix technology, cutting staff was a big part in creating the problems. Hiring more staff is a big part of the solution.

● (1535)

You also need to look at what jobs are being staffed. If you want to hire tradespeople or labour inspectors, for example, federal government wages for these jobs are uncompetitive. We have been trying for years to address that discrepancy through wage studies and collective bargaining.

Thank you for your time. Ms. Kishek and I will address any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Aylward.

Next up, we have representatives from the Association of Canadian Financial Officers.

Mr. Richard, the floor is yours.

Mr. Dany Richard (President, Association of Canadian Financial Officers): Chair, honourable members, and committee staff, good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Dany Richard. I am both a public servant and the president of the union representing more than 4,600 financial professionals in the public service across Canada, members who work every day to ensure the integrity of the public purse.

The goals of the public service staffing system are to ensure that jobs in the public service are open to any qualified candidate and to ensure that appointments are made in a fair, transparent and unbiased way. However, as PSAC has rightfully pointed out in their opening remarks, a 2018 survey of public servants by StatsCan revealed that a mere 46% of public servants believe that staffing activities within their work units are carried out in a fair manner. In other words, more than half of the respondents indicated that appointments for positions in our organizations "depend on who you know".

Having dealt with many staffing complaints ourselves, we can certainly understand why public servants would think that. Not only is the system not delivering the results it's supposed to, but it also takes far too long to deliver these unsatisfactory results, which means higher costs. Staffing processes routinely take months at a time to complete, when the competition for talent has never been higher. If we want to continue to recruit the best and brightest into our public service, 12-month turnaround times simply won't do. We've confused process with rigour. The end result is an inefficient and ineffective system. It's not working. It's not working for us. It's not working for managers. It's certainly not working for Canadians.

I want to use my time today to highlight some of the less obvious impacts of our broken staffing system. First, I want to talk about the overreliance on contractors and consultants. We know from first-hand experience that one reason managers contract out work is that they don't have the time it takes to staff positions. We hear this from our members and we hear it from executives. The truth is that it's easier to tender a contract than to hire an employee even when the work is part of the core mandate. Our members have the competencies, knowledge, experience and eagerness to do the job, but the staffing process takes too long.

The cost of this abuse of the contracting system goes far beyond the exorbitant day rates that many of these contractors charge. Contractors and consultants aren't bound by the same ethics code that public servants must adhere to. Their work isn't always subject to access to information laws. People working in these contract roles aren't given the same protection under our whistle-blower protection regime. The public sector integrity commissioner isn't able to investigate allegations of wrongdoing by contractors the same way he can investigate public servants. In short, contract work lacks the accountability standards that are critical to ensuring that the public good is being served. It also inhibits the ability of members of Parliament like you to exercise your vital oversight role.

The overuse of contractors also means that we aren't investing in our internal capacity and developing the public servants who have committed their careers to serving Canadians. Instead, money is spent building the experience and capabilities of private corporations and individuals. We not only don't develop institutional knowledge, but we also outsource it. This leads to longer-term dependencies on these very consultants, feeding into the vicious cycle of outsourcing. I want to be clear that there are good reasons to use consultants from time to time, but using them as a workaround to inefficient staffing processes is not one of them.

Another impact is the rise in the use of unadvertised job competitions. This is where the staffing process is bypassed by bringing in someone who is deemed "best fit". This undermines the very goals of the staffing system and reinforces the belief that public sector hiring is about who you know, not what you know. As with contracting out, there are times when unadvertised competitions are necessary. They are a useful tool for exceptional circumstances. However, they should not be used to circumvent a broken staffing system.

These are just a few of the impacts of our current staffing system. I know that my colleagues at this table and other witnesses you'll hear from will have many more to share as well. In my remaining time, I'd like to offer two suggestions that we believe will go a long way to making things better.

● (1540)

First, the staffing system should be moved into the collective bargaining process, as it is in almost every other jurisdiction in Canada. Staffing is excluded by legislation that likely violates the charter right to collective bargaining, yet you would be hard pressed to find a less efficient or more costly staffing regime in this country. Making staffing part of collective bargaining would give the employees, through their unions, an ownership stake in the process. It would also allow the government to tap into the collective knowledge of the groups using a process that already exists and serves our needs well.

Second, contractors and consultants should be made to abide by the same ethics and accountability rules as public servants. This wouldn't just level the playing field between staffing and contracting out. It would ensure you can carry out your oversight role and help ensure public trust in the system.

I realize this committee has many witnesses to hear from so I'll end my remarks there, but I look forward to any questions you might have. I'd like to finish by saying on behalf of ACFO, thank you for carrying out this important study.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I thank you both for being succinct. It allows for more questions for you from our members, which we will start right now with Madam Ratansi, for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, please give me a two-minute warning. Sometimes I don't realize what time it is.

Thank you to all four of you for being here. The staffing process, which is 197 days, is not feasible. If I were a millennial, which I am not—the boy at the end of the table is a millennial, the gentleman at the end....

Sorry, Francis.

He didn't take offence—

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Don't pick on me. Pick on Ms. Falk.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: For a millennial to be told to wait for a year is not feasible, and you really need in the public service the right type of people. There is an aging population and there are retirees, so we need to ensure that the system is very effective and efficient. Some of the things that you've said and the recommendations you've made are things that we would like to look at and see how we can incorporate those recommendations or suggestions.

Perhaps you read what Mr. Borbey told us about reducing the administrative burden from 12 requirements to one, plus trying to make the job description process a little simpler, because that's the worst thing for anybody from outside who applies.

In fairness, I want to know what the career paths are that one can take. Say from a CFO perspective, where is the block? If some CPAs were to join your organizations, is the CFO position, for example, available to them or is it who you know, not what you know?

● (1545)

Mr. Dany Richard: That's a very good question.

Recruitment and retention is an issue. Take the example of one of our typical members who has just recently graduated and is a CPA. We want to attract the best and the brightest and they're looking for a job in the public sector, and all of a sudden it will take four months, six months, 12 months. They're not going to wait that long. They need a job right now. They need one to gather the experience. What we're seeing right now is that people are going to private sector firms because they can make you an offer within a week. They'll do an interview. They'll like what they see, have a couple of tests, and there you go. You have a job.

Can one of our members as an accountant have a potential career path to a CFO? Absolutely. There's a model, a way to get you there, but you want to make sure you have the skill sets, the experience and the competencies before you reach that certain level, and right now, because of staffing processes based on who you know, you might not have that opportunity. For example, if I need to have more managerial experience and I want to gain that experience, I apply for a position but unfortunately, because of the staffing process the way it is, I might not have that opportunity to gain that job, because I didn't know enough people.

Specifically for accountants, sometimes their networking skills aren't the best, so they don't know who to talk to. I can tell my own members, and I will tell them, that they need to go out there and do word of mouth, do activities, take part in volunteer work, anything to get their names out there, because unfortunately, the staffing system is broken. We're trying to make it work better but in the meantime, they have to do their best career path the way they can.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: When you say the accountants do not have a network, remember, they are very focused on figures. I'm an accountant. I'm told I'm a very animated accountant. That's beside the point, but when you're looking at integrity, governance, oversight, you really do not pay attention to how you can get out and network.

What are some of the things you would do when a new person comes in? What are some of the positive impacts you could tell them they could make so that they have a chance to progress further?

Mr. Dany Richard: I wish I could tell them, "Do your job well and your career will progress well." You could be the best accountant in the government and you could be stuck in the position all your career, because you will apply for competitions, but no one knows who you are. No one has heard of you. Your name is not out there. Therefore, you don't have a likeability factor. It doesn't mean they're necessarily against you, but people prefer hiring people they know and they've heard of.

Instead of my members focusing on the numbers and making sure they are accurate and well reflected, some of them will focus on their people skills to get their name out there. There's a time and a place for that, but I think their main core mandate is to ensure the integrity of the financial system. That's what we want, that the numbers are right.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I have another question, which probably either of you can answer.

You talked about hiring contractors or consultants. In your experience, what is the length of time a consultant stays within the public sector? How many consultants are there within the system? How can we ensure that their knowledge is transferred over?

I used to deal with the social welfare system in the province of Ontario and Accenture came in. There was no transference of knowledge, and we were left with them forever. Explain to me how you would do that.

Mr. Dany Richard: Can I take this one?

Mr. Chris Aylward: Go ahead.

Mr. Dany Richard: It's a very interesting question. Some of our financial officers, accountants, have the know-how, the experience and the skill set to do a job, and all of a sudden a particular task gets outsourced. The consultant comes in, starts talking with our members about what's wrong with forecasting or budgeting, for example. We'll give him the information, give him nice reports. Basically, our members are doing all the work, but the money's going to the consultants.

So in answer to your question as to how long they are there for, I don't have the average, but I can tell you that some consultants are so ingrained, they have their own office in the government. They have their names in the directory, their own numbers, their own email address. They've been there for years, and every year they create more and more jobs for themselves. This is a significant amount of money we're spending on consultants when the expertise lies within.

● (1550)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Why do you end up hiring consultants? I know the staffing process is a little cumbersome, but isn't there a way that you as managers or directors are able to ensure that you have the independence to hire people or to get the right expertise? Why do you go after consultants?

The Chair: That's a great question. Unfortunately, Mr. Aylward, we don't have enough time for your answer.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Give him 30 seconds.

The Chair: Perhaps with Mr. McCauley's intervention, he'll give you an opportunity to answer the question posed by Ms. Ratansi.

Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Mr. Aylward, you touched on nepotism being an issue. When you talk about nepotism, is it more "who you know" nepotism or more the old-fashioned nepotism of family? Please be brief, because there's a lot of stuff I want to get to.

Mr. Chris Aylward: I spoke about favouritism, and it's the old-fashioned favouritism, as both of us said in our remarks. It comes down to who you know. It's not necessarily the best qualified people getting those jobs, and our members see that. They see that in just about every staffing process. They can see the favouritism.

We talked about the creation of these pools. As I said, that raises the expectation, because you get into this pool and it's like, "Great, I'm in the pool. I'm qualified, and now all I have to do is wait to get picked out of the pool." Then all of a sudden, along comes Mr. Richard and then, boom, he gets the job.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It sounds like small businesses with standing offers.

Mr. Chris Aylward: Exactly.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You talked about the issue with disability hires. The government—current, previous and previous to that—has done a great job of having the public service reflect the demographics of the country, although Mr. Borbey commented that we're succeeding under disability mostly because current members are getting older and being hurt or becoming disabled, so they're qualifying for that. What barriers are you seeing to hiring new people into the workforce from the ranks of the disabled?

Mr. Chris Aylward: Some of the barriers start with the actual process itself, as far as accommodating goes. A lot of the staffing processes involves tests, and if there's a disability involved in doing that test, oftentimes you're simply—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is it a fixable procedure issue? It's not a cultural issue, I hope. Is it more of a fixable procedure issue?

Mr. Chris Aylward: No, I think it's a bit of both, to be quite honest with you. When we say that the governments, the administrations, present or past, have done a good job, yes, but we're meeting the minimum. Here's where we're supposed to be and we are there or just above it. What's wrong with going even a little bit more above that?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We are above.

Mr. Chris Aylward: Barely.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm worried about new hires.

You talked about the selection issue, of favouritism. Do you see it as well on new hires? Ms. Ratansi talked about it and, of course, Mr. Richard talked about it as well. It's 200 days on average. When you consider there's a lot of people getting hired in 50 days, that means there's a lot probably taking 250 days to bring aboard. Are we having the same issues of favouritism on new hires or is it more of an internal thing once they're aboard?

Mr. Chris Aylward: Unfortunately, if you look at Public Service Commission annual reports, and this is very easily seen over the last several years, the majority of new hires are precarious workers. They're terms. They're casuals. Therefore, once they're in, then, as we talked about, it becomes who you know. It's not a significant issue around new hires. The thing about new hires is that when you look at the number of employees hired in the federal public service just last year compared to indeterminate people who were hired versus casuals, term employees, you see that number is a lot higher. That's a significant issue as well.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: A lot of the hiring ability, the responsibility, has been pushed down to lower-level managers, which is supposed to speed things up. As it gets pushed down to front-line managers, why is it still taking so long? As you've stated, how much of it is favouritism if it's getting pushed down to lower-level managers?

Mr. Chris Aylward: It comes down to the human resources capacity within the individual departments and agencies. They simply don't have the resources to do the processes in a timely manner.

I was at Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt out in Victoria just a few weeks ago. I was told by the admiral, the base commander, basically, that he has no other choice but to hire contract workers because he can't hire public service fast enough. They have a brand new building out there that needs to be maintained which are our members' jobs. He said he can't hire the public service to maintain that building. He has to hire contractors because of the hiring processes.

● (1555)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We know the system is broken.

I want to get back to another question. We had a witness last summer chatting about this with Mr. Borbey. The comment was about a written test they had and the question, "You're meeting with the business line client who does not understand the role of national communication services", and the question goes on. The candidate didn't answer correctly because she did not know what a business line client was, and the government later admitted that actually it's an internal term, and so that person flunked out.

I wonder if this gets back to what you say about favouritism. Are we designing stuff to exclude new hires, or is this just blatant—I don't want to call it stupidity—ignorance about how to go about hiring people?

Mr. Chris Aylward: That is definitely a problem. Not only is it a human resources capacity, but it's a capacity to do what has been now downloaded to that particular manager. They just don't have the capacity to be able to do hiring processes in a fair and equitable manner. It comes down to, basically, training. They're not trained to hire people. They were trained to do this job, whatever this job may be, but it wasn't to hire people. Now you're asking them to hire people. They're going to ask the wrong questions. They're going to ask questions that only certain people will have the answer to, and that's certainly demonstrative of favouritism as well.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great.

I have about a minute left. I can't remember, Mr. Richard, if you brought it up, but I'll certainly come back to you in the next round.

How do people speak up against this? The reason I ask is Mr. Chamberlain, when he deemed to show up to help us—I hope he's watching now—joined us when we were discussing the whistle-blower act. This committee put together a very strong whistle-blower recommendation, unanimously, which the government has acted upon. How do people speak up, or are they completely afraid to speak up? How much is because we don't have a strong whistle-blower set-up to protect public servants and contractors?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds for a quick response. Please go ahead.

Mr. Dany Richard: It's definitely correlated. When our members get weeded out of competitions or processes and they ask what's their recourse, sometimes you have to tell them not to bark too much because the next time a competition comes around, it's going to be the same people assessing the same committees.

We need a stronger whistle-blower protection act that actually allows people to speak up and say that this was an unfair treatment of their candidacy and they want someone to fix it. Right now we don't have the mechanism in play to allow people who have been affected by bias—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm out of time. I'll come back to both of you on that if that's okay.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up is Mr. Angus.

Welcome to our committee. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be at your committee.

In my region of Timmins—James Bay, we are fortunate to have excellent civil servants in the public service in Timmins and in the veterans building in Kirkland Lake.

We've been here for half an hour, and my colleagues across the table haven't mentioned the words "middle class" yet. I just want to put that on the record, because they never get up in the morning without saying "middle class and those wanting to join it".

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Charlie Angus: These are good middle-class jobs, but one of the problems with good middle-class jobs under the federal government is that they're being undermined by precarious work.

Mr. Aylward, I really noticed your talk about precarious work.

We have people who go to university and train up and who want to be civil servants, and yet they're in this perpetual pool of contract or temp work without benefits.

Have you seen an increase in the use of precarious work in the federal civil service? How has it grown, and how has it changed?

Mr. Chris Aylward: As I've said, you can see in the Public Service Commission's annual reports on staffing that this number, unfortunately, incrementally increases every year.

What does that do? That puts somebody into a precarious job. They can't really plan, because they have a job for eight months and they don't know what's going to happen at the end of that eight months. Oftentimes, they don't even know what's going to happen to them when the seventh month hits. They pretty much have to wait until the final week to find out they've been extended, which is another issue as well. It just gets extended and extended. There's a saying that one of the most permanent things in the federal government is a term job, because you just keep getting extended.

Absolutely, precarious work has increased. There's no doubt about it. The Minister of Finance, Mr. Morneau, last year basically said that young workers coming into the public service have to be trained in several disciplines because they're going to be changing jobs. How do you attract good talent with that kind of statement?

Precarious work has absolutely increased, and it continues to increase. We don't see it as topping off somewhere and then slowly going down. It continuously increases, and it's a concern.

There is a need sometimes within the federal public service to bring in term or casual workers for a specified time—that's what a term is, a specified time limit—but when an individual continues to get extended again and again, how can they plan? How do you plan for a family for six months out? How do you plan to make a major purchase? You simply can't.

● (1600)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Richard, I want to continue on this line of questioning.

Mr. Morneau, our Minister of Finance, did tell younger generation workers that precarious work is the new normal, as though it were a perfectly natural happening of economics, as opposed to the direct result of internal policies that favour hiring out and keeping people in a perpetual pool of uncertainty.

You said at one point in your testimony that it was easier to contract the work out than to hire.

Could you give us a sense of what you're seeing in terms of its effect systemically, and also how we're burning through and losing really good talent that should be within the federal civil service?

Mr. Dany Richard: It's a great question.

I'll give you an example. If a deputy minister has a new program objective and needs to get the job done and needs resources to do so, we could find and hire the right people, but we don't, because it takes too much time: "I cannot wait six months to get this project going; I need to start today because I have deliverables and I need to reach my objectives."

When this happens, of course we're going to go down the path of least resistance. How can I get a resource in next week or tomorrow? It's not going to be through a six-month staffing process. We have the people with the experience and know-how, as I said, but we're not tapping into that.

The worst part is that we're starting to lose that expertise as we're outsourcing everywhere. We're trying to raise the bar in terms of making sure that people have access to CFO jobs, where they can actually go in their career and add value, but we're not exposing them to the tools they need to progress in their careers.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Certainly you need to hire short term and to contract out at times, to bring people in when you need to get a job done. If they're put into a pool where they have a path to permanency, there's definitely a benefit. However, if we have a perpetual pool of temporary workers who work full time for the federal government and are always being rehired on temp contracts, we're going to have people who burn out and quit.

Is that the experience you're having with your workers, Mr. Richard?

Mr. Dany Richard: We have fewer temporary contracts. For us, it's more consultant work.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Consultant work, yes.

Mr. Dany Richard: Chris, can you speak to that?

Mr. Chris Aylward: There is a lot of temporary agency work being done as well within the federal public service. That does nothing for morale, either. When that job was there, and I've had my eye on that job for maybe the past 16, 18 or 24 months, and now all of a sudden I see it being filled by somebody from a temp agency, because somebody was needed there quickly, what does that do to my morale? What does that do to keep me engaged in my job?

As Mr. Richard said, you have to do your job well, and you should be doing your job well, but it's very difficult to do that when you see the job you may have wanted in the future simply disappear to somebody who is being brought in as a temp agency worker because the manager needed somebody quickly.

Mr. Charlie Angus: When I was much younger and better looking, I was on this committee and we were looking at the same issue, which is the fact that we end up with high turnover. We invest an amazing amount of money in training people, but we're not getting the best benefit for Canadian taxpayers, because we have systems that are favouring temp work, the precarious work, the contractor and the consultant.

How do we establish protocols so that we're actually building up an area of expertise in order to encourage the best and the brightest to stay and work in the civil service? This has gone on for years, and it seems that the turnover remains high and the precarious work is rising. How do we as a committee bring recommendations to actually start to transform this into something that it should be?

The Chair: Could I have a very short answer, Mr. Aylward?

Mr. Chris Aylward: Absolutely. I think you have to go back to a centralized authority and that would be, of course, the Public Service Commission.

● (1605)

The Chair: Mrs. Mendès, you have seven minutes.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's good to have you all here.

I am going to pick up on my colleague's last question, the one to which we didn't get an answer. Very specifically, why would you prefer hiring consultants, and then keep them very long term, or temporary workers? Bottom line, it's more or less the same pattern of not offering employees paths to permanence.

I just don't understand what makes it difficult. Once you hire people, and you put them in that pool of the federal civil service, why don't you offer them the possibility to be hired on a permanent basis?

Ms. Amy Kishek (Legal Officer, Representation and Legal Services, Public Service Alliance of Canada): If I may answer, that's a question for Treasury Board and for departments to give a response to, because it's not clear why there would be a preference.

As has been pointed out, when you have consultants or short-term hires or, in the case of temporary work agencies, working completely outside of the public service for a third party employer altogether, it really creates a discord in the work environment.

It creates a separate set of management for which, again, the federal public service and no one on this committee or anyone else would have direct oversight. It would be completely outside of the collective agreement. In fact, we would argue that it's contracting out bargaining unit work, and it in fact creates a great deal of harm that spills over on both ends. It's not clear why managers favour that, and in fact there has been a lot written and said to the contrary.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: It seems to me that the only obvious answer would be that in terms of labour costs, it would reduce the costs in a sense.

Ms. Amy Kishek: That's certainly it, but that's the ultimate ethical question.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I'm not excusing it; I'm just saying that it seems to me to be the answer to it.

Ms. Amy Kishek: No, absolutely.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: On the other hand, in my view, you also have lots of costs in terms of lack of accountability that those people bring to the system.

Mr. Richard.

Mr. Dany Richard: There is a notion that if you're going out to a consulting firm, it's third party independent, which is not the case. I've seen reports change, even the conclusion, based on comments from people. Our members are not accountable to the consultants. They report to the CFO. Their job is to maintain the integrity of the financial information. We go to the private sector to outsource, to get the quickness, but we also want to have a certain conclusion that we're looking for.

Our members will push back and say, "Look, we can't sign off on this." Regarding Phoenix, many of our members said, "These assumptions you're making make no sense whatsoever, and we can't sign off on this." We could however go to the private sector, and maybe someone will actually tweak our assumptions and give you what you want. There is a way to not only get the work done now, but also to influence the final impact of what we're trying to achieve as a conclusion.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Okay. That leaves a lot to be... considering the Phoenix line there.

You were proposing, Mr. Aylward, that all of it go back to the Public Service Commission, that all hiring should be regulated and overseen by the Public Service Commission, but you do have the joint advisory council. I would like to hear you on that if possible. How often do you meet? Do you have proposals that have been discussed? What has come out of those meetings?

Mr. Chris Aylward: I sat on the Public Service Commission joint advisory council from 2012 until May of this year. The council meets roughly twice a year. What we do is we bring these situations, the very situations that we're talking about today, that we're hearing from our membership, to that council. Then, of course, they're discussed there.

A couple of years ago, we talked about streamlining the processes to make them a little less complicated. Then we were hit with this NDS, new direction of staffing. It kind of came out of nowhere to the council. We hadn't discussed new direction of staffing. We'd discussed some streamlining of the processes. Then all of a sudden it's, "Oh, we need to discuss this at the next meeting; here's a copy of it", and there's a new direction of staffing. The oversight needs to be looked at. You simply cannot have managers who are not qualified to do hiring doing hiring, and that's proven.

The other issue is that if there's a central body to do the oversight, and if it's included in our collective agreement, then we can point to something and say, "We have to do this; we have to start following this. The collective agreements that we're both signatories to say this, and we haven't been doing this." However, right now it's taking 197 days, 224 days, and there's really no accountability to that. If I'm a manager and I know that I want a particular person and then all of a sudden I'm four months into the process and that person leaves, I just say, "Well, you know what? Let's cancel the process and start a new one." That's what's happening, and there's nobody there to say, "No, you're not cancelling this process." There has to be an authority—

● (1610)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: By not cancelling the process, what would you do? Would you go to the next person in line, to the other candidates?

Mr. Chris Aylward: If it's truly a meritorious process, that's exactly what would happen.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: What is the purpose of the council?

Mr. Chris Aylward: The council is basically to be an adviser to the commission. Its main purpose is to provide advice, to provide our feedback from what we're hearing from our members to the council. Then what happens to that after.... As I said, I don't know when the inception of the council was, but from what I've seen in six years, the effectiveness of the council probably should be questioned.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There's never enough time, it seems, in committee hearings like this to have a truly fulsome debate. Seven minutes per member is really not a lot of time. Gentlemen and lady, should you have additional information that you wish to provide to our clerk as we engage in the study, I would strongly encourage you to do so in written form to our clerk. All of your recommendations, your suggestions and your observations will be very helpful to us in our deliberations.

Thank you for being here. You've been most informative and helpful.

Committee members, we will suspend for only about two minutes while we get the next set of panellists to come to the table.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1615)

The Chair: Colleagues, we'll reconvene.

We have another set of panellists. We have the Canadian Association of Professional Employees and the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada.

Mr. Phillips, you are first up. If you have prepared remarks, we would appreciate it greatly if you could keep them to within 10 minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Greg Phillips (President, Canadian Association of Professional Employees): I'll certainly try.

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak today at the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

My name is Greg Phillips. I'm the president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, otherwise known as CAPE. CAPE represents approximately 15,000 economists, policy analysts, translators and interpreters—such as those people behind the window who defend Canada's linguistic duality. We also represent the amazing analysts at the Library of Parliament—some of whom are here today—and the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

For many years, our membership has raised issues with respect to the staffing process, including its fairness and transparency. These two core principles are at the heart of my message tonight.

Of course, there are aspects of the process that do work very well. I will not be delving into those today. I would rather spend our time today discussing what we would like to see fixed.

I intend to focus on four main areas: improvement to fairness and recourse mechanisms, length of time to run processes, arbitrary language requirements coupled with no funding for language training, and unbalanced and unfair use of geographic area of selection.

Regarding fairness in the staffing process and the recourse mechanisms, the process itself is neither transparent nor easy to understand for our members. For example, it is often unclear why a person has been screened out of a process. Mechanisms available to employees to get those answers, especially in the informal discussion process, are often ignored or carried out in a hasty manner. It has resulted in a deep distrust of the process. Despite that, employees remain fearful to speak out or file a complaint, in that they may be labelled as difficult.

On the issue of management's accountability for their decisions in the staffing process, the extremely limited grounds for challenging staffing decision has led to a cynicism amongst the employees in the process and a feeling that managers cannot and will not be held accountable.

Finally, when a staffing decision is successfully challenged, the recourse is minimal and the position is usually already filled.

Regarding the length of time it takes to run a process, the system itself is cumbersome and complex, which results in multiple delays. The changes to the PSEA have not led to a faster hire process as was envisioned under the new legislation many years ago. We have heard from many of our members that staffing actions take too long. It can be even worse for external processes. When competing with the private sector for the best and the brightest, this can be seen as a very significant barrier and a detriment to the public service as a whole.

Even in the case where an employee is offered a position, the additional time it takes to verify or conduct a security clearance, and/or verify or conduct language tests often results in a loss of our best candidates. We submit that this process requires more staff and more funding.

The overall result of the length of time it takes to run one process means that hiring managers are constantly looking for workarounds to the system in order to obtain their candidate of choice. This means that hiring decisions are often open to abuse, and the system becomes about who you know, rather than who is the best person for the job.

Regarding the language requirements, the feedback from our members has consistently demonstrated that more and more positions are being arbitrarily assigned a higher language requirement without any justification for doing so. This is not just an issue for the employees who do not meet the level, but also for hiring managers who cannot fill the positions with qualified candidates.

Besides ensuring that positions are correctly evaluated for the language requirement needed for for the duties of the position, the single biggest complaint we hear is that no funding is available for second language training. It is logical to conclude that if there is an increase in bilingual imperative positions, there must also be a corresponding increase in training and funding to meet this need. However, we are certainly not seeing this, particularly in the professional categories. This presents the possibility that someone exceedingly more qualified for the job does not get it, while someone who simply meets the bare minimum requirements obtains the job because they were fortunate enough to have access to language training early in their career. This concern also has an impact on priority entitlements, including veterans, who are often unable to meet that one requirement.

● (1620)

Regarding the arbitrary use of geographic areas of selection, the area of selection, or AOS, chosen for each competition is often unbalanced and unfair. It appears chosen to both ease the work requirement for the competitions—fewer applicants mean less work for the competition—as well as to minimize relocation expenditures.

This is a public service that represents all Canadians. Regional office job competitions are typically open to everyone across the country, but the jobs, often the better and higher-profile jobs, in the national capital region are limited to just those working in the national capital region. In today's day and age, with the technological advances open to us, geographic distance should not be a limiting factor in selecting the best candidate for the job.

As such, it is our submission that unless there is a reasonable justification for not opening up the job competition to the broader population, the AOS should be as expansive as possible, so that we are obtaining the best and most representative candidates to reflect the Canadian population.

Having set out many of our concerns, it is useful to briefly discuss some possible solutions.

Regardless of what is implemented or changed, my first recommendation is that it be done following proper consultation with the bargaining agents. This means consultation from the ground up on changes and improvements to the PSEA and any staffing policies. This will not only result in a better outcome and buy-in, but will achieve the goal of harmonious labour relations and effective joint problem-solving.

My second recommendation is consistency for competitions across departments, including increased funding for more regular auditing of all departments, not just for a select few each year, in addition to consistency in how the process of applying language requirements or geographic area of selection is carried out. Increased funding for auditing departments will be a big step towards greater consistency and fairness.

My third recommendation is increased funding for, and access to, training for staff advisers, so hiring managers can receive prompt and correct advice and assistance with their competitions.

Regarding training for second language requirements, if we are changing positions to require a language profile of CBC, for example, we need to make sure there are qualified candidates available and funds for language training. If not, the positions either remain empty or are staffed by assignments, which have more flexible requirements than the particular language requirement of the position. Overuse of assignments results in a cascade of staff in acting assignments rather than permanent positions. In the long term, this has the effect of wasting both time and money.

The fourth recommendation is that, rather than pushing managers to return money to their budgets, the process allow them to staff at their appropriate levels. Often the pressure to reduce the budget or return money at the end of each fiscal quarter, coupled with the daunting task of running a long staffing process, results in managers asking staff to do excess work. This has a cascading effect in that staff become burned out or move to greener pastures, thus compounding the staffing difficulties.

Fifth and finally, our members have been very concerned about the outsourcing of the public service employee survey, which was talked about earlier today. We know it is best carried out by Statistics Canada, a world-renowned statistical agency. The results of this survey are critical to an exceptional public service. CAPE staunchly opposes the contracting out of this valuable HR tool, a tool that both management and unions have relied on for a very long time.

On a Phoenix side note, due to the fact that transferring files and changing positions is creating additional pay problems, many staff are not applying to competitions for fear of causing issues in their pay. This is not necessarily part of a problem with the staffing process per se, but it is worth mentioning to the committee, as stories of these decisions are common.

The public service has become accustomed to avoiding risk. However, all risk can be managed, and without some risk, innovation and improvement become impossible. Investing in staffing will not only have an impact on the resources required for the process itself, but also improve the morale, quality of work and resolve of the public service as a whole.

Thank you.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next up, representing the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, we have Madam Debi Daviau. Welcome back to our committee.

Ms. Debi Daviau (President, Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada): Thanks, it's great to be here. I was going to say that it's really nice to talk about something other than Phoenix, but Greg ruined it for me.

Mr. Greg Phillips: You're welcome.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Debi Daviau: Good afternoon. Thanks so much for inviting me to speak at this important hearing.

My name is Debi Daviau, and I am the president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada. PIPSC is Canada's largest union of professionals, working predominantly for the federal government.

Mr. Chair, that includes the fine gentleman to your left. We're just pointing out our members in the room today. Collectively, we represent all your staff, so....

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Debi Daviau: We welcome the opportunity to participate, along with my colleagues from other unions, as part of this panel to discuss the current state of the public service hiring process. Canadians rely on public services every day to make their lives safer, healthier and more prosperous. Our members are the ones who provide those services.

What we see and hear from our members is that the staffing process simply takes too long. As a result, resources can't meet the demands. Services suffer and managers turn to short-term solutions that often increase the government's overreliance on outsourcing. We want staffing to be merit-based, but we also need it to be timely.

The federal government's staffing recruitment process is lengthy and cumbersome, often taking six months to a year, and even longer sometimes. It is slow due to administrative delays over sequential security clearances and bottlenecks when it comes to screening and interviewing processes, with delays and time wasted. While there have been some attempts to solve these issues through the use of new platforms, e-recruitment and increased flexibility, from talking to anyone who has gone through the process on the ground lately, it doesn't appear that much has changed.

As you may know, the government often uses what are referred to as pools for staffing. Candidates have to go through a hiring process to be included in a pool that qualifies them for a position at that classification and level. Then, when the department needs to fill a position at that level, they can draw from the pool. Getting your name in a pool can be a long and burdensome process, and may not even result in a job in your near future. Kevin Lynch, the former clerk of the Privy Council, noted that the federal government will not be successful in recruiting Canada's best talent if we cling to slow and bureaucratic hiring processes—and it's been a while since Kevin was there.

Access to timely recourse is also a major sticking point in staffing, with most federal Public Service Labour Relations and Employment Board hearings—even the name is too long—taking in excess of 24 months to be heard, with decisions taking an additional six months to a year to be rendered. By then, revocation of the appointment may already be moot. Some findings may have no more than a symbolic effect if they are not precedent setting.

I say this not just for the sake of the individual enduring the staffing process—if they stick around long enough—but for the government and the country as a whole. When staffing processes are too long and cumbersome, departments and managers will look elsewhere. They may very well opt instead to use their operations and maintenance budget to staff temporarily.

Staffing, amongst other reasons, is why we are seeing an overreliance on outsourcing and contracting out. We represent close to 60,000 public service professionals. One of the main issues our members have been facing is the government's overreliance on outsourcing. Outsourcing is costing the federal government money, jobs, morale, accountability and productivity. Just look at the failed Phoenix pay system.

Okay, I went there too.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Debi Daviau: Instead of looking to the government's own workforce, to those who built and maintained a pay system that worked for 40 years, the government left the project in the hands of a multinational corporation. Public service employees have now endured over two and half years of being underpaid, overpaid and not paid at all due to this wrong-headed decision.

The federal government currently spends an estimated $12 billion a year on outsourced services, more than the budgets of Statistics Canada, Health Canada, Fisheries and Oceans, Environment Canada, the National Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission combined.

No official—or public, at least—estimate exists of the total number of outsourced federal government workers who constitute what has been styled a "shadow" public service. Nearly half of all PIPSC members who were surveyed in 2015 said they were aware of contractors in their team or work unit, and 59% said contracts in their team or work unit are routinely renewed. That means folks continue to go from contract to contract as opposed to being hired as employees. Forty-one per cent reported contractors present for periods between one to five years, and 17% reported contractors being present for over 10 years.

● (1630)

We've identified a number of sources at the root of the government's outsourcing problem. One of them is staffing. The Public Service Commission carried out a survey of staffing: 63.4% of managers surveyed believed staffing is not quick enough; 25% of managers indicated staffing options don't allow them to staff quickly; 85% of managers indicated that the administrative process to staff positions is burdensome; and 55% indicated that this process was burdensome to a great extent.

Over a prolonged decade of government restraint and growing demand for government services, overreliance on contractors to do the work of public service professionals has taken its toll on employees and on the government's own employment requirements. Many of the downsides have been known for years. A 2010 study by the Public Service Commission provided telling evidence that the government's managers were misusing outsourcing provisions and circumventing the hiring practices set out in the Public Service Employment Act. The PSEA exists to ensure staffing in government agencies is guided by principles such as merit, integrity, transparency, regional and ethnic diversity, and bilingualism.

As a result of contracting out, a separate workforce now exists within the public service. Thousands of jobs are contracted out for long, continuous periods of time, but those performing them are neither subject to nor protected by the PSEA. The delays in the staffing process become an excuse for outsourcing. Outsourcing ends up undermining the principles that the PSEA is designed to uphold. We need to reverse this trend and invest in HR processes to speed up hiring without compromising PSEA standards

As I said at the beginning of my presentation, the process takes too long. We want to have a merit-based system, and we want it to be a lot faster. That's why we propose the following recommendations to the committee:

One, we need to enforce the requirement that new government projects and initiatives consider their staffing and human resource needs right from the start. Training, staffing and recruiting for a new project needs to happen at the beginning of project development. These processes can take time if existing staff need to be trained, subject-matter experts drawn from other parts of the public service, and new employees brought in to tackle new workloads. Taking these steps early on in the process will ultimately save the government money down the road. Managers will not be forced to go outside to contractors and temporary help agencies because they need people quickly. We cannot start the assessment of staffing and human resource needs after procurement and project scoping is complete. We need to start these processes early if we don't want to continue to rely on costly outside contractors to do the work that could have been done by in-house, highly trained public service professionals.

Two, we'd like to ensure that there's access to the skills already on deck in departments and agencies. The government needs to create skills inventories and a mechanism for departments to access them even in the short term. The government has, for example, over 13,000 IT workers in their employment, making them the largest IT employer in the country. The government needs to be doing a better job at getting all it can from this highly skilled and highly motivated workforce. Again, relying on in-house resources will ultimately save the government a lot of money in the long run.

Three, create government-wide hiring pools of public service employees for all departments to draw from. If pools are departmental-specific, individual departments feel ownership over their pool as they have invested time and resources into its creation. They're understandably often unwilling to share, and sadly, pools sometimes expire before being fully drawn from. Government-wide hiring pools would also help to create a standardized hiring process that doesn't vary from department to department. This is a recommendation we have already raised with the Treasury Board.

I thank the members of this committee for the opportunity to discuss with you the public service hiring process and share with you our recommendations for an improved system that we believe will work better for all Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go directly into our seven-minute interventions, starting with Mr. Peterson.

● (1635)

Mr. Kyle Peterson (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'm going to give some of my seven minutes to my colleague Mr. Drouin, so if you would let me know when I have about three minutes left, that would be appreciated.

The Chair: I will.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Thank you.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here. It's very informative, if nothing else. Some of it's daunting, to be honest, but it's informative, for sure.

I see a theme from the previous witnesses and the panel here. Outsourcing is clearly a problem. The length of time for staffing is clearly a problem. Those two problems are intertwined, without much doubt there.

Ms. Daviau, I'm going to start with you. You had some good recommendations.

I find it concerning that there isn't something already such as a skills inventory. Your recommendation is very general. I don't need you to necessarily give the details, but how would you see this working? Would it just be for the members of your association or across the entire public service?

Ms. Debi Daviau: I see that as creating an inventory of all skills in the public service, not just for our members.

There are some examples out there. ESDC maintains a skills inventory. It has since I've been there, so for over 10 years. It's fairly up to date, but of course the system is only as good as the information that is put into it.

We need some sort of standardized way to have government-wide inventories of aptitudes, so that when shorter-term projects or projects that need to occur immediately require additional resources, it's easy to tap into the skills you already have.

Not to go back to Phoenix again, but we just can't get around it these days, certainly, had they tapped into the skills they had to build the new pay system, we would have averted a lot of the issues we had with it being done by an outsider, not to mention the billions of dollars that were wasted.

It costs two to 10 times more to contract out a position than it does to staff it internally, and that's including all the benefits and additional costs toward permanent staffing. It just makes sense to create mechanisms so that you can insource the work as opposed to outsource it. Use the skills you already have. There are a number of public servants who have time available to commit to additional projects, but nobody knows who they are or what they have to offer.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Right. In that sense, outsourcing would be even more expensive. You would have to outlay no new resources at all to use someone who is internal and has the capacity.

Ms. Debi Daviau: Correct. It's unfortunate because sometimes you get the skills from somebody outside, but they very rarely have the context or understanding of how government operations work. Although they bring in a new aptitude, they're missing the context of where that aptitude is going to be used.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Exactly. I appreciate that.

Mr. Phillips, there are a couple of things you brought up.

On this notion of geography, and with the technology, why do we need people to necessarily work in the interior? Are there things we can do now without having to have new policies? What's limiting you in the framework you have from doing that already?

Mr. Greg Phillips: It's just government practices and policies. I know some departments are already moving that way. They're calling it workplace modernization in the government sphere now, to allow people to work from anywhere, but it's not government-wide yet.

I can think of Montreal, for example. There are regional offices there with telecommunications, and if you have to have a team meeting, you can go into the office that day.

I'm a staunch believer.... We were talking a little bit about millennials earlier. I think it's the expectation nowadays: "Why can't I work from home? Why can't I work from somewhere else? Why do I have to work in the national capital?"

The competitions are still being run and the limiting factor—I touched on it in my presentation, why they haven't been doing it up until now—is that if they open it up to a wider market they have more candidates to interview and evaluate. Because of the length of the staffing process, they want to minimize the number of people who can apply, to reduce the amount of work they have to do in the competitive process. It speeds it up.

There is no...with the technological advances...that's Debi's group. She can answer that. I don't think that in this day and age there should be any technological limitations to allowing someone to work from anywhere.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: I think every member here would like more federal jobs in their riding. That's a way of doing it for sure.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Peterson.

Mr. Drouin for two minutes.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I'm going to build on what Mr. Peterson said, but I want to take another angle. The average age of people we hire in the public service is 37 years. I know there was a pilot project done with the Public Service Commission where they essentially hired on the spot, because one year.... Being a member from the national capital region, I've heard so many stories of, "I got the call a year and a half later. Well, thanks. I've already got a job, but thanks for calling."

Ms. Daviau, you're clearly competing against the Googles and the like that will go into Ottawa U or any schools, and offer new graduates jobs on the spot.

Have you learned about the Public Service Commission pilot and would you support that?

● (1640)

Ms. Debi Daviau: You know what? I'm not sure yet.

For sure, as I said, we want to see processes speeded up, but we also want to see merit continue to exist. I am concerned about the trend of putting all our apples in the basket of recruiting new people when the vast majority of your workforce are not new recruits. They are people who have been there for some years.

I think a big part of the problem is that there have been many years of training lacking, not enough identification of where the skills of the future will be. Certainly, my members who are IT members, because our environment is constantly changing, have a really strong ability to teach themselves the skills that are coming out tomorrow but they really need to know what the government's direction is.

There has not been enough training. There has not been enough identification of the future direction for existing public servants to really shore themselves up for the jobs of the future. That leaves you with a deficit and you automatically think we need to recruit new people to fill that gap. In fact, where you really need to expend some effort is with the vast majority of your workforce, training them, doing the career development and the professional development required to ensure that you have the skills when you need them.

Don't get me wrong. I still believe you need to do recruitment of new employees, but I don't think that you should throw out all the criteria that you've been applying to your existing employees in order to do that. I think that's inherently unfair.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I know you could have gone much longer.

Ms. Debi Daviau: I have nothing to say on this topic, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I understand that. I understand your passion.

Mr. McCauley, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Welcome back. I will do my best not to mention the city from Arizona.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Phillips, you touched on hiring vets and language issues. Could you expand a bit on that?

Mr. Greg Phillips: In my group, we don't really have a whole lot of knowledge about that. Maybe Debbie can help me.

Do you know something about using...?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You touched on it briefly.

Mr. Greg Phillips: Yes, I did, and it was only very briefly and it was with consultation with Debbie.

Ms. Deborah Cooper (General Counsel, Canadian Association of Professional Employees): To be fair, like Chris Aylward, I've been sitting on the Public Service Commission joint advisory council for the last five years. There have been a number of issues that have been raised about veterans being able to have access to jobs once they're into that priority entitlement but there are pieces that they are missing.

If they're missing one or two pieces in the whole picture, they're not going to get hired. Often language requirement is something that can come up. Although it's not necessarily a massive issue for the CAPE membership, it is an issue overall, and it is something that's a barrier to not only veterans but also other priority entitlements who are missing those pieces.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How much of that is Ottawa based and how much of that is rest of the country based?

Ms. Deborah Cooper: In terms of who is on the—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When you said language issues—

Ms. Deborah Cooper: For language issues, that statistic I'm not aware of.

They do release those statistics every couple of months from the PSC in terms of how many people are on the priority entitlement list and where people are moving, whether it's from disability, veterans, whatever the case may be. It can even be relocation of a spouse. There's a whole bunch of different priorities that are there. Yes, it is a national issue.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: My next question is for Ms. Daviau as well as Mr. Phillips.

We talked about the overly complex system. What can we do to get rid of that but still maintain a fair hiring system?

We've heard about it taking 200 days, which is absolutely ridiculous. I was not an accountant in my previous life but I have been an HR manager. Imagine it, 200 days is mind-boggling. What are we doing that needs to be deleted? You talked about security clearances and that. Surely, there's some of that we can rid of to speed things up.

How do we do so and still maintain it being fair and transparent?

Mr. Greg Phillips: We both have something to say.

Ms. Debi Daviau: I honestly believe that there are some parts of that process that you have to maintain, that you could simply speed up or make more efficient or less bureaucratic. Certainly, there's a lot of red tape or bureaucracy in that process that could probably be looked at in terms of streamlining.

Again, I do believe that it takes a certain amount of time to choose the right candidate for a position, so you need to start earlier so that at least the essential parts of that process can continue and you can still have your resources on time. I don't think that resourcing should be an afterthought that comes in at the end of your planning cycle.

As I said, creating government-wide pools might be a way to go about....

● (1645)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have the pools that exist now gone through a lot of the screening already or are they just sitting—

Ms. Debi Daviau: Sorry?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The people who are in the pools right now in the process, have they gone through security checks, and this and that?

Ms. Debi Daviau: Yes, exactly.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay.

Ms. Debi Daviau: They have gone through the entire staffing process. They've been checked for language and security requirements. They meet all the criteria of the position. They've been interviewed. They've gone through an entire staffing process to get into that pool.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm short on time, so I'll go to Mr. Phillips.

Mr. Greg Phillips: I like the idea of pools. These pools have an expiry date. You have a candidate. They have met all the criteria, have gone through the interviews, have scored, and as a result, they're in the pool. But sometimes these pools expire in a year.

I know some managers can extend that period of time. Coupling with what Debi said earlier, if you have government-wide pools that stay for a long period of time.... Just because I'm qualified today, that doesn't mean in a year I'm no longer qualified for that promotion.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Right.

Mr. Greg Phillips: If you extend the length of that time period and open it up to a wider period.... We often hear of pools that expire, and everybody who was sitting in the pool just leaves and then has to enter another competition. That's a major problem.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I want to get back to what we were discussing with Mr. Aylward about the fairness and transparency in terms of speaking up when there is an issue.

I think, Ms. Daviau, you appeared before the committee when we were discussing the PSDPA, the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, and whistle-blower protection.

Ms. Debi Daviau: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Members put in a unanimous report, and it hasn't been acted upon. How much of a detriment is it not having any real protection for whistle-blowers?

I was down in the United States. They're light years ahead of us, and they're still complaining about very little protection. We're at the very bottom of the OECD for protection.

Ms. Debi Daviau: We believe that to be a major issue. Where it pertains to staffing, certainly where there is abuse of authority or fraternization, or whatever, there needs to be the ability for people to raise red flags without getting themselves into trouble. That's what that whistle-blowing protection is all about.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The current set-up is not at all adequate, is it?

Ms. Debi Daviau: No, not at all. In fact, we would not advise our members to enter into that process. It doesn't protect them at all. It's going to be a career-limiting or a career-ending move if they do.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I've heard that repeatedly. It's shocking that for 300,000 Canadians we do not have proper whistle-blower.... I really hope the current government will act on the very good report put together by the members of this committee.

Ms. Debi Daviau: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Phillips, do you have any thoughts?

Mr. Greg Phillips: In the PSES we've been talking about, the results for that actually—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It looks like 55% say they're worried.

Mr. Greg Phillips: That's an astronomical number. They have grounds to file complaints.

One of the big problems that we face in our union is that a lot of our members, when we meet with them and say that they have perfect grounds to file a grievance or a complaint, and they'll say, "Well...." There's going to be another competition and they don't want to be seen as a troublemaker.

With this best fit that we talked about, as soon as you speak out against, maybe, your current manager, they say that you're no longer the best fit for the promotion. When your whole career trajectory and your whole future rely on your boss liking you, are you going to file a complaint against him or her?

Ms. Debi Daviau: Not to mention, it's only something like 2% of those complaints that are ever won. You go to all that trouble—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It is shocking.

Ms. Debi Daviau: —and all that risk only to have a very low chance of success.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: When you pile that on top of all the regulatory...and all the difficulties we have as it is to hiring people, then we....

Mr. Greg Phillips: When you are successful, the best thing they can do is put you back in the pool. But if there's a competition where there are only three jobs and they put you back in the pool—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You're there for—

Mr. Greg Phillips: —five months later, all those three jobs are gone, or the best three jobs are gone.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Angus, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

I'm going to follow up on my colleague's line of questioning, but I'd like to begin by thanking you and your members for keeping democracy going.

In my 14 years here, I've sat on all manner of committees. I've been involved in all manner of debates. I've been involved in extremely tedious and profound work, extremely explosive, and much of which resembled the *Jerry Springer* show. Throughout it, it was the clerks, the analysts and the translators who kept this machine going, with incredible professionalism. Politicians play by World Wrestling Federation rules about everybody else, but we reserve Italian soccer rules for ourselves. If we ever feel we've been slighted, we're all over the floor whining and howling. However, in all my years, there's never been a complaint against the staff for the work they do, for either being partisan or for being unprofessional, and particularly with the translators, who have to do the extremely difficult work of taking all of our gobbledygook and making it sound reasonable or understandable without causing needless—

● (1650)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: How do they translate that into French?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have no concern. I know they will translate that perfectly clearly.

That said, I'm really concerned to hear your conversation where you used words such as "deep distrust","fearful" and "cynicism," and being worried about speaking out. To me, there's something fundamentally wrong if the people we trust with our democracy are working in an environment where they don't feel their value is respected and protected. I would put to you that there is much harder, better work we need to do in terms of respecting the work being done by the civil servants.

Mr. Greg Phillips: Thank you.

Ms. Debi Daviau: We recently did an update to a survey of our scientists, particularly on the muzzling of scientists. Although when we took it in 2013 some 90% of our members felt that they were being muzzled, that number is down to a little over 50%. However, a little over 50% of scientists still feel that they are being muzzled. Despite the declarations that they can now speak openly about their work, they still can't really speak openly about their concerns.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I want to move on to the issue of staffing and having a wider market pool.

When I was on this committee some years ago, we were looking at high turnover rates in certain areas and regions outside the national capital. As I said, I'm more than willing if you want to help us get more employees into the Timmins and Kirkland Lake offices. They do excellent work. The conditions are great. You're going to really like having your staff there.

They always called it "the empire strikes back", the deputy ministers who like having things under their control, who didn't like it out in the field, but it seems crazy to me. If we're going to be attracting the best and the brightest and supporting middle-class jobs, we could probably have a devolution of work further afield and be more efficient.

Mr. Phillips, I believe you raised that. How would we make that operable?

Mr. Greg Phillips: It's really case by case. It depends on the department. It has to be operationally feasible. Sometimes you actually have to be in the same room with people to work on things. Translators are a good example. Our translators work all across the country. You give them work, and as long as they have access to the Internet to use the tools they need in order to do that, they can work anywhere.

If you're looking into it, you might want to talk to Statistics Canada. I know they're working on a workplace modernization. They're one of the front-running departments working on how you open up the office so that employees can work from anywhere at anytime. That's fundamental. They're doing some really good work over there. I don't know exactly what they're doing, because I'm not there anymore, but I know they are proceeding on that.

That's an area where, if you want a resource to consult to see what's going on, they are actually looking at opening it up and allowing people from across the country to work from wherever they are.

Ms. Debi Daviau: I would really appreciate it if one of the honourable members would ask me about telework.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I wasn't going to, but it just so happens that it's fourth on my list of questions. I'll just bump it up one.

Go ahead. Tell us about telework.

Ms. Debi Daviau: Thank you so much.

The reason I say that is that I do represent IT workers, which lends itself very well to virtual work. As Greg rightfully pointed out, not every job lends itself to virtual work, but a large majority of the jobs do. From our perspective, we believe the government needs to be present in all these small cities and towns across the country. Things such as Service Canada centres, or Canada Revenue Agency outlets are ways for the government to keep in touch with the people. Therefore, it stands to reason that you would have significant resources outside the national capital region.

As mentioned, it's a virtual world. The tools are really there to connect virtually. I do it all the time with my members across the country. I don't necessarily have to run from place to place to make that connection.

To put that in context, the mandate letter for the Minister of Employment talks about promoting alternative and flexible work arrangements. I honestly believe that with the Government of Canada being your workforce, your army, so to speak, you have a real opportunity to invoke those kinds of changes within the public service, addressing these issue of the ability to work virtually and flexibly and from different locations, which helps to recruit and retain the best and the brightest. That's going to help with your next generation of recruits, because that's an attractive environment to them, and it upholds those values that the government is currently trying to set out for all Canadians.

● (1655)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The time I have left is very short. Regarding the issue of the rise of the shadow public service, we talked about precarious work and about perpetual contracts and temp work. Can you illuminate a bit more the rise of the shadow public service?

Ms. Debi Daviau: About $14 billion a year is spent on contracted-out services. We believe that most of those are 100% cost overruns, because the aptitudes and the availability of public service employees are there; you just have to be able to tap into it. The cost is anywhere between two and 10 times more expensive, so it's not even in the government's best interest to go this route.

I honestly believe that if you fix staffing and you make it simpler and easier for good managers to hire good resources when they need them, they are not going to be turning to different budgets, such as the O and M budget, and other processes to get those resources in-house.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Jowhari, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I will be sharing my time with Madam Yip.

Thank you, witnesses. You have all come with a lot of great recommendations around the hiring process, where the challenges are and where the improvements are. Based on the note that the Library of Parliament has prepared, I understand that the joint advisory council brings all the representatives from public sector unions together at least three times a year. This provides a platform for at least the union to be able to represent the concerns and the opportunities for improvement.

When was the last time that the joint advisory council held a session? Were you part of it? Were these opportunities for improvement raised?

Ms. Debi Daviau: I'll let Debbie answer, because she actually sits on that committee. I have a representative there. However, that committee is doing more information sharing than consultation, so the opportunities to actually submit ideas for improvements are rare. Moreover, it's the Public Service Commission reporting on their initiatives. It's more of a reporting than it is an opportunity for us to get into a meaningful exchange.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Would one of your recommendations be that the role of the advisory committee be expanded to also take input?

Ms. Debi Daviau: I think it was always intended that it have the ability to consult, to actually do the meaningful collaboration and consultation, but that's not actually what's occurring. You can't really do that three times a year, anyway. You have to be a little more regular about it.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Madam Cooper.

Ms. Deborah Cooper: The last meeting I was at was in June, but I have switched organizations. I probably just missed one in September or there's one upcoming in a few weeks. Hopefully, I'll be at the next one. It meets roughly three times a year. It's a bit higher level. There are representatives from both sides. There are a number of unions, and the Public Service Commission, and people from Treasury Board and a few other departments, as well.

I would agree with Ms. Daviau that most of it is information sharing. There is an opportunity to provide feedback on policies and initiatives of the Public Service Commission at that advisory council, but usually when it's already at a certain level. It's not ground-level consultation. It's not saying, "We have this blue sky idea, and let's work together to create something." That part is missing. It's more like saying, "This is the initiative we're working on; here's where we are. Do you have any comments on that? We'll update you the next time we meet as to where we are at that point." It's a bit more at that level.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you.

I'll go back to Ms. Daviau.

I understand that your institute represents about 60,000 members and 27 different employers in seven jurisdictions. This is from the notes. Are there any best practices among all of these jurisdictions that we could use in the process of improving hiring?

Ms. Debi Daviau: The vast majority of our members fall into the public sector, even if they're different public sector jurisdictions. The majority of them are in the federal public sector. What we find systemic in the federal public sector, we also find problematic in the provincial public sectors. I'm not sure there's any good example to be had there.

● (1700)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Let me change the conversation.

A lot of discussion has been around recruitment, which is really around the timing, the challenges, and the sequential nature. You're saying some of them are rightly held and some of them need to be improved. Very few have talked about the actual cost of hiring. What's the actual cost of hiring someone when it takes 197 days? Do you have any idea about the cost that these departments are incurring around the hiring process?

Ms. Debi Daviau: We have never been privy to the cost. I can tell you that departments are proprietary over those pools, because it costs them a significant amount of money, time, resources, and that comes at an expense to other things that they want to engage in.

I'm not sure what the tally is, but I know it's a significant waste, especially if they're not utilizing the resources that are then identified through those processes for a pool.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: The fact that it costs a lot supports the notion of sharing the pool so the costs could be shared.

Ms. Debi Daviau: That's part of the problem. Departments have to fund this resourcing themselves. Once they've gone to the trouble of establishing a pool and determining pre-qualified resources, the last thing they want to do is let other departments who haven't paid for that process draw from those pools.

That's the biggest part of the problem. They feel an ownership over the pool they've created because they've paid for it. I think there needs to be a better way to collaborate on the paying and the producing of those pools, so that barrier—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: I want to give my colleague at a least a couple of minutes to ask a question.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): No, that's fine. You can keep going.

The Chair: You have about a minute left.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: We've talked about recruitment, but very few of the organizations have come here and talked about retention. Retention also helps us. If we have a proper retention program that talks about proper incentive, path for growth, mobility, flexibility over the work, it helps us with making sure that we maintain and grow the pool.

What are your thoughts about retention?

Ms. Debi Daviau: Competitive pay.

Mr. Greg Phillips: Competitive pay and also training.

A lot of word of mouth is given to training in the public service. I touched on it in my presentation. Language training has really suffered. People see a roadblock. They don't meet the linguistic profile. Competitions at the higher level are a certain linguistic level. They're not given time off or time to do linguistic training. That's a roadblock, so they're going to leave.

If they see that they can't advance—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: So it's training, as well as competitive compensation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Panellists, I want to thank you again for being here.

Your advice, suggestions and recommendations are going to go a long way to helping us develop a very good report when that finally happens.

Should you have any further information that you wish to transfer to the committee, I encourage you to do so through our clerk. Any recommendations, suggestions or observations you have would be gratefully accepted, so please do that.

Thank you once again for being here.

Colleagues, we will suspend for about two minutes and come back in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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